

Hepatitis C Program

The Live Longer Project

Our mission is to promote the prevention of hepatitis C and related physical complications for the residents of Arizona by increasing disease awareness and prevention through a wide variety of strategies and interventions.

Live Longer Pilot Project Summary

An estimated 80,000 Arizonans are chronically infected with hepatitis C (HCV). Current evidence suggests that up to 20% of these will progress to cirrhosis and life threatening liver disease. Because serious liver disease seems to appear some 20 years following initial infection, the Live Longer Project has been designed around simple interventions to prevent many persons from progressing to that point.

In December 2003, we sent out 300 letters to HCV positive individuals around the State which were part of our HCV registry. In this letter, we asked them to call us to discuss health related issues. One hundred and thirty-six people responded. We provided them with an opportunity to participate in a questionnaire and discussion on how to better manage their HCV positive status. Our project focuses on secondary prevention, or preventing serious liver disease in persons already infected with HCV.

Messages within this discussion included:

- Heavy alcohol use causes progression to liver disease, and no safe level of it has been established for people with liver conditions.
- Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B: Those with liver disease should protect themselves against other viruses that attack the liver.
- Find a doctor who specializes in the management of liver diseases. Continue to see your doctor for regular checkups as advised. Be empowered and informed about hepatitis C and treatment options.
- Protect others from being exposed to your blood by avoiding sharing razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers and needles used for injecting drugs, tattoos and piercings.
- Discuss with your medical provider the appropriateness of screening for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, for which you may be at risk..
- Attend a local support group for positive feedback on how to cope with HCV.

- Learn how to keep your liver healthy with basic diet and lifestyle changes.
Consult with your doctor before making any changes.

Findings from the Live Longer Pilot Project interviews indicated that:

- Nearly half of participants reported not knowing their positive results for HCV, at two months after their testing.
- The majority reported being tested due to doctor suggestion during a routine exam
- Approximately 7% not aware that they were tested specifically for HCV
- Only 16% claimed they were tested for HCV because they were having symptoms.
- Most (73%) of contacts were from Maricopa County (Pima 13%, Pinal 5%)
- The most commonly reported risk factor for HCV was a history of injecting drugs, even once; 24% had a history of transfusions before 1992, and 23% had a history of tattoos
- Approximately 30% had not been tested for HIV; 10% of this group requested referrals for HIV testing sites.
- Most commonly reported insurance types: AHCCCS 53%, Private 43%
- Approx 75% had not had their hepatitis A or hepatitis B vaccination yet
- About half of the respondents reported drinking alcohol at least socially; 40% reported not being told of the risks of alcohol and Hepatitis C.
- All respondents that reported alcohol use were counseled on the importance of alcohol abstinence; many participants reported that they had already stopped drinking alcohol upon being told to do so by their physician.
- More than 80% expressed interest in having resource materials mailed to them.
- Approximately 80% agreed to a 4-month follow-up call by our program

Findings and recommendations

- Due to effective screening of today's blood supply for HCV, sharing drug paraphernalia for drug use is the most common mode of acquiring new infections. Because many will not develop symptoms from HCV for 10 years or more, people engaging in high-risk behaviors are not likely to get tested for HCV. We recommend that anyone who has injected drugs even once should consider HCV testing. Ideally, people should not use drugs; however, until they are able to address their dependence, they should not reuse or share needles, syringes, water, and other materials. Appropriate precautions must be taken when receiving or applying tattoos (artists should wear gloves and use disposable equipment).
- Our study indicated that nearly half of the HCV positive individuals we provided telephone counseling, had not been given their initial diagnosis even at two

months after they were tested by a lab or doctor. Appropriate and timely provider-to-patient communication is recommended.

- We found that nearly half of our contacts were not counseled on the harmful effects of alcohol and HCV prior to our interview. Healthcare providers should routinely stress the message that there is no known safe level of alcohol consumption for those with HCV.
- Although there is not a vaccine currently available, there are other types of hepatitis that can adversely affect the health of one's liver. At-risk persons should be immunized against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, as appropriate. Although HCV positive individuals are at particular risk, our pilot data indicated that 3 out of 4 of these individuals are not yet immunized.
- Finally, it appears that the majority of those with HCV are quite receptive to health education and the opportunity to obtain practical information that would empower them in their journey of managing their HCV infection. The Live Longer Project was based on the premise of simple interventions such as these. Preliminary results support this contention, thus far. We will keep on stressing secondary prevention and evaluate its impact.

For the complete Live Longer Project evaluation, please contact the Hepatitis C program 602/364-3658.